

The Gift of Absence: Mural Restoration in a Policy Void

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Preface

The following essay was originally presented at “Mural Painting and Conservation in the Americas,” a two-day symposium sponsored by the Getty Research Institute and the Getty Conservation Institute, May 16–17, 2003, at the Getty Center in Los Angeles.

At this event, a cross-disciplinary roster of art historians, conservators, and artists discussed the social, artistic, and political dimensions of murals, the value they hold for different constituencies, and the rationale and conservation techniques for ensuring their long-term survival.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not represent the views of the J. Paul Getty Trust.

[Editor's note: This essay was conceived as one part of a three-part examination. The other two are John Pitman Weber's discussion regarding which murals get saved and Timothy Drescher's paper about priorities in the conservation of community murals.]

Beyond the difficulty of just painting well on a large wall, there are political, social, environmental, and fiscal obstacles to creating and maintaining murals. Those obstacles have been embraced—even loved—by muralists, and they are seen to be an important part of the process of creating an excellent mural. I would like to speak about some specific situations arising in Chicago, because it is what I know best, and because I think our experiences may illuminate the opportunities and need in other places.

A Sense of History

By nearly every account, Chicago is the birthplace of the community mural movement. Thematically, early murals expressed both nationalist and ethnic pride and utopian views of a culturally diverse world living in harmony.

As to the origins, it is important to note that artists (trained and honorifically named individuals) initiated the community mural movement. Nonetheless, the cultural bureaucracy has only sporadically recognized community muralists as artists and community murals as art. Not uncommonly, the mural portion of an artist's production was seen to be an adjunct to the main body of studio work, even as the muralists themselves sought to foreground their public work. When artists dedicated themselves to public practice, community engagement was considered “good” work in the world—but not “great work” in an artistic sense.

Passing on the Skills

What have emerged in Chicago are a mural movement and a mural restoration program that have thus far been self-perpetuating. Neither receives structural support from local cultural or municipal institutions. At Chicago Public Art Group, we have twenty core artists ranging in age

from about twenty-five to sixty, crossing demographic boundaries in ways that would have been considered utopian decades ago. These artists meet regularly, mentor many new artists, and collaborate with pleasure. When restorations are done, the Chicago Public Art Group has text and photo archives that provide crucial information about the creation of the works. And to the best of our ability, we maintain contact information on the original artists.

The following are local conditions affecting the creation and loss of murals:

- Weather is a potent force in the upper Midwest. Extreme changes in temperature and humidity occur in Chicago during and between seasons.
- Urban planning in Chicago layers onto the land grant system of the nineteenth century, so there is a strong grid pattern to the streets. There are few long vistas that end in full views of walls.
- Urban “renewal” has been concentrated in African-American communities on the South and West Sides, the very neighborhoods that gave birth to the mural movement. Chicago has an aggressive tear-down program for abandoned buildings. In the name of renewal, this program has sometimes destroyed and depopulated neighborhoods, removing buildings that had murals or that would have been appropriate mural sites.

Municipal governance in Chicago is marked by strong zoning ordinances and a weak city council government. Some murals challenge regressive politics—e.g., segregation and prejudice. Local aldermen (the term applies to both men and women) can support or withhold support for specific works if asked, but they have little control over whether a work gets created or not. There is no citywide public policy regarding community murals or their restoration.

Architectural style in Chicago is an inherent part of the visual environment. Historically, most buildings until the 1930s were no more than three stories tall, whereas residential buildings in New York City were up to six stories tall. As a result, Chicago developed murals that were visible simultaneously to pedestrian and vehicular traffic. When housing is torn down, the walls of the buildings behind them are likely to be interrupted by numerous windows, making those walls a challenge to muralists. There are not many town houses that present blank side walls.

Masonry walls abound in Chicago; clay is cheap and plentiful. Masonry walls in Chicago require tuck-pointing every twenty to forty years. When tuck-pointed, a typical mural loses about one-sixth to one-fourth of its paint.

Concrete retaining walls lift elevated train lines above surrounding streets, and so there are concrete retaining walls in many neighborhoods. Because the walls lack moisture liners behind them, efflorescence, oxidation, and general crud seep through.

Graffiti is only a minor problem in Chicago. A 1996 ban on the sale of spray paint is still in effect. The real protection for murals is the permeable, mutually supportive relationship between muralists and spray-can artists. An antigraffiti program will no longer obliterate murals to eliminate a small amount of graffiti.

Vagaries of ownership are introduced when a building is sold or changed as a community evolves. With a building's change of ownership, commitment to murals may be broken in the absence of a legal or social covenant. Muralists in Chicago have not sought to lease walls—they have only sought permission to paint.

Real estate redevelopment is booming because of enormous reinvestment and gentrification in neighborhoods long neglected and abandoned. Buildings are torn down or renovated. New residents and owners sometimes honor historic neighborhood murals, and sometimes they are “forced” to acknowledge the importance of a mural, if only for a few years.

Today

Chicago has recently revised its municipal policy regarding the creation or preservation of murals on city-owned property, and the city has no policy regarding the creation or maintenance of community murals. I alternate between thinking that this simultaneous presence and absence of policy is both a frustrating shortsightedness and an unintended gift.

Chicago is a politically conservative city, with the exception of the Harold Washington years, Chicago's leadership is not known for taking risks that involve the politics of encouraging people to speak up, a notion that is at the very heart of community murals.

The current absence and presence of policy have had a regrettable effect on the creation of new murals and on the training of new muralists. Further, the situation has had a deleterious effect on the preservation of important existing murals not on city-owned walls.

The regrettable effect on the creation of new murals arises because the only work that can be “permanently” affixed to city property must be commissioned through the Public Art Program (PAP). The “logic” behind this decision is, I believe, an interpretation of the public art policy that permanent installation will (in the minds of lawyers and art bureaucrats) accord said work the honorific term “art,” and the art will then become subject to the aforementioned policy: i.e., the city will be responsible for maintenance and preservation. The PAP, as currently administered, does not choose to interpret its empowering ordinance to value or encourage public involvement.

As a result, today murals and mosaics for park district buildings, for example, must be produced on panels to be bolted to walls. These murals are seen as temporary installations; they can be removed without public review. Bolted panels create an uneasy relationship between the work and the surrounding architecture. The projects begin and remain separated from the wall, floating above it, in even the most acceptable of installations.

The full effect of this policy on the next generation of public artists remains to be seen, but there is a palpable scaling down of expectation and ambition that results in, I believe, the suppression of the intention and spirit of the younger artists. This could be a tragic loss if it reflects a domino-effect loss of voice for developing artists.

The deleterious effect on existing murals results from the policy that only recognizes murals on city-owned walls. As a result, there is no direct or indirect municipal support available for the restoration of significant outdoor murals unless they are mounted on city-owned walls. As a result, the restorations that do get done have been done without a studied and conscious commitment to preserving this legacy. For example, Pilsen, a neighborhood with a decades-long reputation for murals, is heavily promoted by the cultural tourism industry. Yet in reality, Pilsen has had virtually no new murals in many years, and the older murals are deteriorating very badly.

Without a vigorous restoration program, this facet of cultural tourism will be a body of work that will move from comatose to dead.

The City of Chicago Public Art Program has not been proactive in encouraging stewardship of community murals. The director of the PAP has passively stated that mural restoration is something that “would be good to do.” But the program has never stepped up to treat mural conservation with any respect.

So what are the implications of having no municipal policy regarding mural restoration, and how are restorations done when there is no policy? What has emerged is an opportunistic practice. We work when we can, where we can. In a peculiar way, murals are restored in much the same way they were created: artists (and organizations) determine to do something for their community. The process involves community education, dialogue and research, and collaboration and training. The creation of culture and the expression of knowledge are done in the neighborhoods where people live, not through the cultural bureaucracy. Theory and practice united result in partnerships that extend the meaning and value of murals to new generations.

In recent years, the Chicago Public Art Group has used restoration opportunities as hands-on studios for training developing artists. New muralists work alongside the original artists, gaining skill and insight into how the original paintings were done. Sometimes we repaint and reinterpret as best we can the original intent of the artist.

Restoration versus Conservation versus Repainting

It is fair to say that the early murals were done with a hearty dose of testosterone; the founding fathers believed that the best way for a mural to last was to make it with the strongest, hardest oil-based paint available. Within a few years, the muralists were infected by a more female notion: that permeability is preferred over a powerful sealing of the wall. Murals have since been painted with acrylic.

The process of renewing murals painted with oil paint is not a conservation project focused on saving everything available of the original mural; both conservation and restoration involve encapsulation of old material and reduced breathability for the wall.

The current Chicago Public Art Group restoration sequence is the following:

- research archives, print photos as reference materials;
- photograph existing mural condition for archives;
- clean the wall using a power washer with a very mild detergent to remove grime and loose paint;
- seal the wall by spraying with acrylic varnish;
- redraw missing elements;
- repaint the mural using the techniques researched in archive;
- reseal the mural with acrylic varnish;
- rephotograph the mural and provide written notes for the archive.

Yes, we know there is a need to develop a structure with responsibility for inventory and assessment. We also need a greater commitment to bringing younger artists into the process with the elders to learn from them the technical tricks, the organizing techniques, and the decision-making process that informed the original work. Preservation requires more than recapturing the original look of the mural. The meaning of the work must be reexamined, perhaps revised or reinvented, and reasserted as a historic record and as a contemporary reaffirmation of meaning.

Jon Pounds

Jon Pounds is executive director of the Chicago Public Art Group (CPAG). His early public work involved the creation of temporary street installations, and it expanded to collaborative public artworks when he joined CPAG in 1983. In 1989 Pounds began directing CPAG, which experienced significant growth under his leadership. He has designed and conducted numerous workshops on processes of community public art in many cities across the United States. Pounds has also served as a consultant to mural organizations in Philadelphia, New York, and Covington, Kentucky. He was the project sculptor and general manager for the 1994–98 *Water Marks* mosaic installation at Navy Pier in Chicago—the largest community art project in the nation at the time. Pounds was a recipient of the 2001 Community Service Fellowship awarded by the Chicago Community Trust.